The Fourth Church Pulpit

COMMUNION

June 2, 1996

John M. Buchanan

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.

And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance.

When the Stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"
What will you answer? "We all dwell together
To Make money from each other?" or "This is a community?"

T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"*

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Chicago, Ill. 60611
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture
Matthew 28:16-20
1 Corinthians 1:10-17

"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."
1 Corinthians 1:10 (NRSV)

"Bowling Alone," is the catchy title of a scholarly essay which appeared recently in *The Journal of Democracy.* The author is Robert Putnam, Professor of International Affairs at Harvard. The full title of his article which everybody is talking about is "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." Professor Putnam discovered the curious fact that while the number of people who went to a bowling alley and actually bowled rose by 10% recently, the number of bowling leagues in the country has actually declined by 40%. Therefore, people are bowling alone.

That may seem like a trivial statistic but Professor Putnam thinks it is symbolic of something that is happening widely and deeply in our culture. He calls it our "declining social capital." Our own Elmer Johnson, a member of this congregation, delivered a fine speech at the Kellog School at Northwestern recently and described the phenomenon as the "declining health of the little platoons of society as Edmund Burke called them, the networks of civic and social engagement."

The fact is that since the 1970s there has been a fairly dramatic decline in public participation in voluntary associations. Sociologist Robert Bellah calls it our "crisis of civic membership." Numbers of participants are down or declining in the PTA, the League of Women Voters. Elizabeth Dole had to ask the Pentagon for help recently because the American Red Cross can no longer afford to maintain its traditional service as a communications link between armed service personnel and their families in time of crisis.

Some analysts attributed the decline to the increase of women in the workplace. But in the 1980s the same phenomenon emerged in traditionally male associations: Lions, Elks, Shriners. The number of Americans who attended any meeting on civic or educational affairs has fallen by a third in twenty years. (See *Christian Century*, 5/8/96)

It's a worrisome development within American culture, and some of our brightest and best are trying to figure out what it means and why it is happening. It's a serious problem because we have learned that values, the illusive phenomenon known as "public morality," the basic social contracts that allow us to live together, are formed in life's basic associations: mainly family and community. And when those basic associations disintegrate, so does public morality, and our ability to live together.

It is a concern to the church because what is happening in the culture is mirrored in religious institutions, particularly those, like the Presbyterian Church, which are lodged deeply in the mainstream of the culture.

If you attend worship here regularly or even frequently, you may have noticed that for the past several months the sermons on Sunday mornings have focused on one book of the Bible, St. Paul's first letter to the early Christian church in the City of Corinth. It's not that the preacher is in a rut — although that may well be. The reason for the consistent focus is that the Presbyterian Church nationally feels sometimes like it is coming apart at the seams and dissolving into 11,000 separate, totally autonomous congregations, having as little as possible to do with their association with one another. Ecclesiastically, Presbyterians are doing a lot of bowling alone these days.

And so the national church recommended that at this point in time the whole body ought to take a good long look at a resource in scripture that has a lot to say on the subject of ecclesiastical bowling alone, namely First Corinthians. The state of affairs in our church is perhaps best indicated by the fact that the motion to study First Corinthians passed by a very narrow margin.

I decided to heed the national church's recommendation and so I studied First Corinthians again, in a concentrated way, last January: read all the available commentaries and translations, even tried a little Greek myself, taught a course on First Corinthians during Lent and have been using it for sermon texts for a total of eleven weeks now. My reasons are several. I have always placed a high premium on being a part of the national Presbyterian Church. I have liked being a member of the family. Even though my own family was never particularly interested, I was intrigued and delighted to discover that as an individual Presbyterian I was part of an enormous enterprise with a national and international presence, a history, an album of wonderful family pictures. When I took my ordination vows I was happy to promise to value and to serve that larger institution — that association.

In addition, I find that I am a candidate for Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). If I am elected on June 29 I will spend much of the next year presiding over and speaking to and for a church which sometimes doesn't feel like it wants to be a church anymore, a church in which everyone is bowling alone.

So it seemed appropriate, considering all of that, to stay with First Corinthians. For those who have persevered but are weary of the journey, let me assure you that it is almost over. I may have one more go at it, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. And my guess is that after all of this, my colleagues won't go near First Corinthians again for years to come, if ever.

Today we return to the beginning of the letter which keeps seeming to me as if it were written last week, with us in mind. The people in that tiny, fragile community of faith, precariously perched in a bustling, cosmopolitan port city with the liveliest prostitution industry around, a city which mostly ignored them, and whose intelligentsia regarded their ideas as foolishness — the people of that little church, instead of holding on to one another for dear life, had decided to pick up sides and fight. How like a church! Outside, the world may be coming to an end; inside the brothers and sisters are attacking one another, calling one another names, disparaging the faith of one another, doubting sincerity, drawing lines in the sand, insisting on boundaries, and being just plain mean.

"Is Christ divided?" Paul asks them, a little impatiently. "I appeal to you, ... by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." [1 Corinthians 1:10]

Paul had a big vision. The truth of Jesus Christ as he had come to understand it was not simply about this tiny, fragile little group of Christians. It was truth for the world. Truth with a capital "T." Paul believed that in Jesus Christ something new had happened in human history — something with relevance for every man and woman. In Jesus Christ, Paul dared to believe a new humanity had occurred, a new possibility for the whole creation. It's a grand, sweeping theology. It's not at all provincial or tribal. It is about God's love for the world, the whole world, the world of Greeks and Romans and Jews and Gentiles. The world of different nations and races. It was about a new community, a new creation, a new being. It is breathtaking.

And — get this — its steward, its manager, its agent, and its example is none other than that little group of nit-pickers, the ones who choose up sides and excommunicate one another for lapses in orthodoxy and for political correctness. "I belong to Paul," some said. "Well, I belong to Peter." "That may be, but I belong to Jesus alone."

At the heart of our claim as Christians is that God does have something in mind for the whole creation. It's not just a limited edition invitation to paradise for the theologically correct. It's not just for the people at Moody Church or Holy Name Cathedral or Fourth Presbyterian Church. It's about a new creation. And if you believe that very good and very hopeful news, then this matter of ecclesiastical bowling alone is very important, this sudden decline in civic association, social capital, community, is critical. How serious is this? How fractured, how tribal are we becoming?

It's our job to show the world another way, to be another way.

Have you seen, or read about the first television spot volley of the Presidential campaign designed by the Republican party and answered immediately by the Democratic party: degrading, demeaning, insulting and vulgar personal attacks on the President of the United States and on Senator Dole.

Arthur Schlesinger has written a new book, *The Disunity of America,* that suggests that if we don't find a way to renew our covenant, our belonging to a common community of purpose and hope, we are well on our way to disintegrating into warring tribes. It happens. It happened in Yugoslavia. It threatens to happen in Canada, Northern Ireland and India.

In his fine book, *The Spirit of Community,* Amitai Etzioni probes the soul of our culture and concludes that we are long on rights and entitlements and short on duty and responsibility. Etzioni tells about a talk show guest who in a discussion of the Savings and Loan mess said: "The taxpayers should not have to pay for this, the government should." (p. 3) "We suffer," he says, "from a severe case of deficient we-ness. It turned out that an economy can thrive, at least for a while, if people watched out only for themselves. But it has become evident that a society cannot function well given such a self-centered orientation." (p. 24)

We almost need a conversion, Etzioni believes, a whole new way of thinking about who we are as a people, a nation, or for that matter, a city. Think just for a moment about how we exercise community responsibility for children, for their education. Two-hundred-thousand people "stood up for children" yesterday in Washington, in response to what *Time* magazine called "The polarization of America into a land of rich and poor — in which the number of children on the losing side is growing at an alarming rate." *Time* quoted the Director of the Annie E. Casie Foundation:

> "It may well be that the nation cannot survive as a decent place to live, as a world-class power, or even as a democracy — with such high rates of children growing into adulthood unprepared to parent, to be productively employed, to share in the mainstream's aspirations." *Time,* 6/3/96

Clarence Page observed recently that professional sports practices an interesting kind of community responsibility. Every year the worst teams get the chance to choose the best players from the pool of available draft picks. And the teams share league profits. "Curiously," Page went on, "the exact opposite happens in the public sector. Our poorest children get the worst schools with the worst resources, which almost guarantees they will stay poor. The result is a steadily widening gulf between those who have the greatest chance and those who have the least opportunity to get ahead at all." (See *Context,* Martin E. Marty, 5/1/96)

Interesting that even the competitive world of professional sports understands the basic value of community, of working together, better than the culture, the body politic understands.

Well, it may seem, at first blush, preposterous, but what we believe God has in mind as a response, a redeeming alternative to the process of dividing, choosing up sides, tribe against tribe, nation against nation, race against race, even religion against religion — God's brilliant rejoinder is none other than that blessed little church in Corinth. None other than us.

"What life have you if you have not life together?" T. S. Eliot asked in one of his most famous poems, *Choruses from "The Rock":*

> "There is no life that is not in community,
> And no community not lived in praise of God."

Theodore Parker Ferris, one of the great American preachers of the past used to tell the story of a little child who was lost in one of those vast cornfields in Iowa. People searched all day and all night. The search was expanded and continued a second day and night. The third day one of the searchers suggested, "Let's join hands," and they did. A vast company of family and friends and strangers, hand-in-hand, fanned out across the fields. Finally they found the child, but it was too late. The heart-broken mother said, "Why didn't we join hands sooner?" (Thanks to The Reverend Calvin Jackson for this story.)

God has something else in mind for creation, for nations and tribes and races. God's son came to bring it, lived to show it, died to make it possible, rose again to create it — in the most unlikely places.

There is a symbol of that new creation, that new beginning. Jesus himself taught it to his closest friends on an occasion when they were more than tempted to start picking at each other, and to choose up sides and decide who was responsible for things going so wrong.

The ritual is so very simple. And sometimes the ritual becomes the reality and bread becomes the body broken for us and wine becomes blood shed and the act of serving one another and eating and drinking together becomes a holy communion and for a moment, at least, you and I are part of a community, and God's new creation breaks in and establishes a toehold in our life, and the new humanity actually starts to emerge, the new being in Jesus Christ, and if the world looks — if you and I raise our eyes and look around and see as we serve one another the bread and the cup — we can actually behold what God has in mind for creation — a family — men and women who belong to one another because they belong to God. A new community lived in praise of God. Communion.

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O God, break down the barriers that divide the human family. Bless your church everywhere. Make it an instrument of your peace, an example of the family of faith. Create in each of us a new openness to one another, to those with whom we disagree, to those with whom we have conflicts. Transform us into agents of your love and citizens of your kingdom, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.